

Kissing Cousins by pathvain aelien

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Summary: Mr. Clarke at the Snow Ball.

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Scott Clarke *always* volunteers to chaperone the Snow Ball. He volunteers to run the canned food drive, he's in charge of three different after-school clubs, and he willingly stays after class every day, just in case he's needed. His kids and their parents are encouraged to call him at any time if they need any help, although only one student has actually ever called him at home. He's just that kind of teacher. It's why he's always voted teacher of the year, every year for the last five years. He genuinely loves his kids.

Which is why he's immediately concerned when he sees Mike Wheeler, sitting alone at the dance. Scott isn't supposed to have favorites, but he does. He can't help it. Mike is definitely one of his favorite students. He's bright, funny, and sweet. He's just a good kid, and until this past year, he's always been a happy kid.

This year has been different. Scott has tried to talk to Mike, and Mike's parents. He's done his best to figure out why his cheerful and energetic student changed into a sullen kid, a kid that better belongs at the back of the class. A kid that never raises his hand anymore and never seems excited about anything. Scott has been worried about him, at least until he saw Mike and his cousin over Christmas break.

The Mike that rang his doorbell that day was happy. Relaxed. The old Mike, in other words. He wasn't sure what caused the change in his student, but Scott was relieved. He knew-and still knows-that Mike is too smart to do drugs, but he was clearly going through something terrible. Something he didn't want to talk about. He's just glad the old Mike is back and everything is back to normal.

Until tonight. Until he sees Mike sitting alone at a huge table. Mike looks depressed. Not sad, not disappointed, but actually depressed. It scares Scott to see it. Scott makes the rounds, making sure none of the students are up to anything they shouldn't be. He keeps an eye out for his other favorite students. Mike's best friends. They're all here tonight. Will (another student who's been troubled this past year) is dancing with a girl and giggling. Dustin looks thrilled to be

dancing with Mike's older sister. And Lucas is dancing with Scott's newest student. They all look happy, all of his kids. All except Mike.

Scott wonders if maybe that's it, maybe it's just the fact that they are growing up. Getting interested in girls. Maybe Mike is just worried about being left behind. Scott understands that feeling perfectly well, it's hard to be the last in a group of friends to get a date. Although Dustin technically doesn't have a date, either.

Scott starts to head toward his student, just to chat. His students never resent that, they appreciate when he treats them as equals. As friends.

"Scott? Can you give me a hand with this?" It's Marsha Miller, one of the English teachers. She's carrying (or attempting to carry) what looks like a year's supply of cookies. She gives him a distracted smile as he immediately takes the majority of the packages from her.

"No problem!" Scott tells her, giving her a smile.

"And can you just open half of them now, and keep the other half behind the table?" Marsha asks, "I hope we ordered enough." She sighs.

"I think this is plenty," Scott laughs.

"Only three more hours," she says, and even the words sound like a sigh.

"Aren't you having fun?" Scott asks her. Marsha gives him a look and leaves him alone with approximately a million cookies. She's a very old-school teacher. She's never given her students her home number, or stayed after class. She's formal and strict with her students. Scott doesn't dislike her; they just have radically different teaching styles. He likes his kids to be able to talk to him, to be interested in something. Anything. That's his favorite part of teaching, seeing his student's faces light up when they discover something exciting.

Scott gives Mike one last look before heading toward the refreshment table. He'll talk to Mike in a few minutes, as soon as he's finished.

Except that it turns out it's more than a few minutes, it's more like

half an hour. Once the cookies were opened and stacked, they ran out of punch. And once he mixed the punch, they were out of cookies again. The cycle repeated several times until he unearthed another punch bowl. He dragged over a smaller table and doubled the refreshment stand. One table for punch, one for the snacks. When he's finally finished (for now), he checks the table again, but Mike isn't there. He glances around and sees that Mike is dancing with a dark-haired girl in a blue dress. Mike looks a lot happier now, and Scott smiles. He was right. Mike was just feeling left out.

"Scott? Can you check the parking lot while I do a sweep of the hallways?" It's Marsha again. Scott nods and smiles, heads for the doors without another word. It's always a good idea to make sure no one is drinking anything stronger than punch, or doing anything else that's inappropriate for a kid in middle school. He doesn't expect to have any problems, and he doesn't. The parking lot is clear, except for Will's mother and Chief Hopper. They're sharing a cigarette. Scott gives them a little wave. Joyce sees him and waves back. A nice woman. He's so glad that Will is home safe now. It was a terribly odd business, his disappearance. And the funeral. A horrible day. Scott can't imagine what that was like for Joyce Byers.

Scott pushes open the doors and immediately runs into Marsha again. Literally, this time.

"Scott, there you are. Any problems?" Marsha's tone of dread indicates that she's expecting the worst. Possibly a drug deal, or some type of gang activity.

"None whatsoever," Scott reassures her, and she sighs.

"Thank you, Scott. Would you mind watching the punch bowl for a few minutes?"

"Don't tell me it's already gone," Scott laughs.

"No, but I don't like for it to be unmanned for too long," Marsha says in a disapproving tone. "You never know what these kids will get up to, if they have the chance."

Scott refrains from rolling his eyes like one of his own students,

instead of a man in his mid-thirties. "I'd be happy to," he tells her, and turns on the smile again. She doesn't smile back. This time he's the one who sighs, but very quietly.

Scott ladles a cup of punch for himself, smiling at his students as they pass by. A couple of them stop to chat with him.

"Hello, my Lord," Dustin says, giving him a little bow. Scott laughs. Dustin's always a card.

"Evening, good sir," Scott replies, eyes twinkling. "Are you boys having a good time?"

Will nods and smiles, accepting a cup of punch.

"The best! It's totally awesome," Dustin enthuses. "Will's a hit with all the ladies tonight." Dustin nudges Will and Will rolls his eyes, blushing. Scott laughs and catches sight of Lucas, dancing with the dark-haired girl. Mike isn't dancing, but he still looks happy. He's chatting with Max at their table.

"It doesn't look like Will's the only one," Scott says, nodding toward Lucas. The boys follow his gaze and giggle.

"They're just friends," Will says, making eye contact with Dustin. Dustin laughs. Apparently it's an inside joke.

"Yeah, Lucas is totally into Max," Dustin adds.

"Oh. I see. Well, I'm glad you guys are having a good time," Scott says, then trails off as Lucas spins his partner and he catches a glimpse of her face. She looks very familiar.

"Do I know her?" He's not really asking the boys, he's talking to himself. She's definitely not a student of his, but he's seen her before. He's sure of it. Lucas spins her again and they dance closer to the refreshment tables. Scott sees the girl's dark eyes light up as she laughs. She looks solemn, until she laughs. Yes, he definitely knows her, although she was blonde a couple of weeks ago.

"Isn't that Eleanor?" He turns to his students and doesn't miss the panicked expression on Will's face. Dustin looks oblivious. He's

nodding happily.

"Yeah! That's El," Dustin says, while Will frantically shakes his head at him, eyes wide. Dustin finally notices. "*What?* What did I say?"

Will sighs. He gives Dustin a very pointed look, a look that speaks volumes. Dustin's eyes widen and his mouth falls open as he finally understands whatever Will's trying to tell him.

"Oh. Um." Dustin looks at Scott awkwardly, while Scott stares back in confusion. He's not sure what's going on.

"We'd better get back to the table," Will says firmly, and Dustin hastily grabs as many cups of punch as he can carry.

"Yeah! Totally. See ya, Mr. Clarke," Dustin says. He can't wave, because his arms are full. He walks carefully back to the table, protectively cradling the cups.

"See you, boys," Scott replies, watching them go and shaking his head. He's good with his kids, but he'll never completely understand them. He catches Marsha's eyes again as she motions toward the door. Time for another quick sweep of the parking lot, apparently. She clearly doesn't trust the kids at all, which is a shame. They're wonderful kids, most of them. Scott isn't expecting any surprises.

A few minutes later, Scott is chatting with the DJ and keeping an eye on the punchbowl, just to keep Marsha happy. He catches sight of one of his students as he crams as many cookies into his pockets as he can. It's Troy. Just like he's not supposed to have favorites, he's not supposed to have least favorites. Although he does. Troy is a troublemaker, and a bully. Will and Mike approach and pour more punch, giving Troy a wide berth. Scott keeps an eye on him because he's well-aware they've had problems with Troy before. He's surprised when Troy ignores them both completely. In fact, he's giving them an even wider berth. Will and Mike don't notice, they're laughing. Scott's eyes follow them curiously as they walk back to their table, and he notices that he's not the only one watching.

Eleanor is standing halfway between their table and the refreshment table. She's with Lucas. Although he's talking to her, she's not paying

any attention to him. Her gaze is fixed on Troy. Scott smiles a little at the protective look on her face. It eases somewhat as Mike and Will successfully avoid Troy. She relaxes a little, but her gaze turns to Troy again and she scowls. Scott tries not to laugh. He's surprised when Troy seems to feel her gaze, not because he senses someone staring at him, but because of his reaction. Troy glances up and sees the small girl glaring at him, and the panic on his face is evident. It's more than panic, actually. It's terror.

Scott's gaze turns back to Eleanor, who's still standing motionless. He doesn't think she's blinked at all. Lucas finally notices that something is wrong, because he turns around, too. Troy sets his cup down and starts to back away from the table, without breaking eye contact with the girl. Then it happens very quickly. He trips, or *seems* to trip, but it's very strange. Although he's walking backward, he falls *forward*, into the refreshment table. Right into the punch bowl, as a matter of fact. The punch splashes everywhere and Troy's completely drenched. Punch drips from his hair and his light suit is covered in red Kool-Aid. A couple of kids nearby giggle but Troy doesn't even seem to notice, he just flees. Lucas is one of the gigglers. Scott looks back at him and sees that he's grinning at Eleanor. Eleanor gives him a tiny smile. Her nose is bleeding, just a little. Scott rummages for a napkin but before he can approach, Mike's already there. He hands her a Kleenex and she smiles at him. Mike shrugs at Lucas and Lucas keeps giggling.

"Scott?" Scott turns. It's Marsha again. He nods without even waiting for her to ask. Clearly, they need more punch. The next few minutes are busy for him and he forgets about Troy's odd behavior. He mops up the puddle and rips open another packet of Kool-Aid to replenish the bowl. Marsha gives him a pointed look and Scott nods. She's still concerned a 12 or 13 year old is going to spike the punch. Scott knows better. He's chaperoned this dance, year after year, and it's always the same. He's not expecting any surprises.

He's pouring himself another cup when Dustin and Will walk up. Dustin's arguing that they need more Nilla wafers, and Will's telling him they already have chocolate chip back at the table.

"Nilla wafers are like, totally superior to chocolate chip, Byers," Dustin lectures. He glances at Scott. "Right, Mr. Clarke?"

Scott smiles. "I have to say, I prefer chocolate chip," Scott tells him, and Dustin shakes his head mournfully.

"Besides, they don't even have Nilla Wafers," Will says, scanning the table. Dustin's face falls and Scott laughs. Scott rummages behind the table and produces an unopened box.

"I may have saved these for you," he tells Dustin, handing them over. Dustin beams at him while Will mutters something about not encouraging him.

"*Awesome!* Thank you, my Lord!" Dustin rips open the box and offers him the first one. Scott laughs and accepts it.

"You guys taking a break from dancing?"

"Yeah, we figured we'd man the table for awhile while they dance," Dustin says. Scott looks around and sees that Lucas is dancing with Max again, and Mike is dancing with Eleanor. It's so sweet of him to bring her to a school dance, to try to make her feel included while she's in town. Scott raises his cup to his lips and then it happens. Something surprising. Something *shocking*, actually. Scott's already tipping his punch, but he's no longer in control of it. That's evident, because he merely pours the punch down his front instead. He doesn't even notice. Dustin and Will stare at him, open-mouthed. They both turn to see what he's unable to stop seeing.

Mike is kissing Eleanor.

Kissing Eleanor.

His *cousin*.

Mike is kissing his *cousin*.

Dustin and Will immediately lock eyes, horrified. Scott finally seems to realize he's dripping wet and he reaches for a napkin. Dustin hastily hands him a couple and Scott drags his eyes away from the happy couple-the happy *cousins*-on the dance floor. Dustin looks at him in concern, because Mr. Clarke looks a little weird. A lot weird, actually. Scott stares at the boys in astonishment.

"Um." It's all Will can think of. He scratches his arm and looks at Dustin. Dustin's at a loss for words, which is a rare event.

"Uh. Ah." Dustin giggles nervously.

"You guys are taking forever," a new voice grumbles, and they all jump. It's Lucas. Lucas looks at them in concern. Dustin and Will are goggling at him like a couple of stunned fish and Mr. Clarke is dripping with Kool-Aid. Mr. Clarke looks funny, like someone just punched him.

"*Lucas!*" Dustin exclaims happily. He grabs for Lucas and hugs him until Lucas shoves him away.

"What the *hell*, Dustin?"

"*Help*," Will whispers, almost inaudibly.

Lucas glances at Mr. Clarke. Mr. Clarke is staring at something behind him. There's a sinking feeling in his chest because he thinks he already knows what the problem is here. *Shit*. He turns around and sees Mike and Eleven dancing. Eleven leans up and kisses Mike, and Mike grins like an idiot. *Fuck*.

Lucas turns around again. Dustin and Will are staring at him, waiting for him to say something. *Anything*. Why the *hell* did they have to introduce her as Mike's cousin? *Seriously? Fuck*. Lucas no idea what to say, no idea what could possibly explain this.

"Uh. They do things differently in Sweden." That's the best he can do, and it's *completely fucking lame*. Mr. Clarke just looks at him and Lucas shrugs. He beats a hasty retreat back to their table, completely ignoring Dustin's frantic gesturing. *Fuck it*.

"Um. Yeah. And she's only his *second* cousin," Dustin tells him helpfully. Will slaps a hand over his eyes, as if that could block this whole moment out of his memory. Forever. Dustin shrugs and pauses awkwardly. Will lowers his hand slowly. Dustin's waiting for him to say something. Apparently it's his turn to try to make this moment even more horrifying than it already is.

"Yeah. Second cousin." Will repeats it, like hearing it twice will

suddenly cause the phrase to simultaneously make more sense and also sound less disgusting. Dustin's still imploring him to *do something*.

"Um. And...um. Ah. They're very...close," he finishes feebly. At the exact same moment, Mike leans in and kisses El. *Again*. Will turns bright red. Dustin starts giggling, he can't help it. *This is fucking horrible*.

"*Very, very close*," Dustin snickers. Will glares daggers at him but Dustin ignores it, he's giggling too hard to even see his friend.

Will gives up. Dustin is hiccupping laughter into his hands. He can barely stand up, his whole body is shaking. Will grabs him firmly and drags him away.

"See ya, Mr. Clarke!" Will calls over his shoulder as Dustin howls. "*Shut up, Dustin*," Will hisses. Scott just watches them go before letting his gaze drift to Mike Wheeler again. Scott hastily looks away before he sees anything else that he'd rather not see. He drops his eyes to the punchbowl again. For the first time in years, he wishes Marsha's suspicions were correct. He wishes someone *had* spiked the punch. Hell, if he had anything with him, he'd do it himself. He could use something a little stronger than punch right now.

Scott's eyes helplessly turn to Mike again. Mike is holding his cousin close, dancing with his forehead resting against hers. They both look utterly content.

Scott could use something a *hell of a lot stronger* than punch, actually.